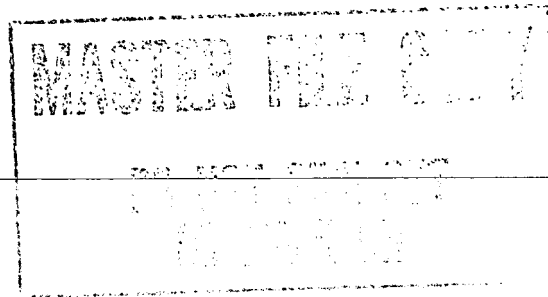




Directorate of
Intelligence

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**Colombia:
President-Elect
Belisario Betancur**



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An Intelligence Memorandum

State Dept. review completed

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ALA 82-10081
June 1982

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Colombia: President-Elect Belisario Betancur

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An Intelligence Memorandum

*Information available as of 4 June 1982
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted]
Office of African and Latin American Analysis.
Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, South America Division, OALA,

[redacted]
This memorandum was coordinated with the Directorate
of Operations and the NIC. [redacted]

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*ALA 82-10081
June 1982*

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**Colombia:
President-Elect
Belisario Betancur**

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Summary

Conservative Belisario Betancur's solid plurality in the election on 30 May will give the President-elect a firm base from which to begin dealing with endemic economic and social problems, including:

- A security threat posed by Cuban-supported insurgents.
- Widespread corruption stemming from illicit narcotics trafficking.
- Labor and middle class frustrations in the face of slow economic growth, declining real wages, and high unemployment.

Betancur is an enigma to many Conservatives, largely because his views on specific issues are as uncertain as are the economic and political advisers on whom he will rely. We share the view of the US Embassy that Betancur's foreign policy will be less in harmony with US interests than has been the case under the Turbay administration and will reflect Betancur's intense nationalism and Christian Democratic leanings.

On narcotics policy, Betancur will resist any efforts by the Reagan administration to have Colombia embark on a herbicidal eradication program of its own. Bogota will insist that it is primarily a problem for the United States to resolve and is not as important as other issues facing Colombia at the present time.

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President-Elect Belisario Betancur.

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**Colombia:
President-Elect
Belisario Betancur**

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The Election

Conservative Belisario Betancur has been elected President for a four-year term beginning 7 August. Voter turnout was unusually heavy by Colombian standards; the final vote may be close to 7 million, a 40-percent increase over the 1978 presidential election. Betancur's solid margin of victory—approximately 400,000 votes—will give him a firm base for his administration's efforts to begin to deal with serious economic and social problems.

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The first Conservative to be elected president in 36 years, Betancur owes his success in large part to a rancorous split in the majority Liberal Party. In his first major address, Betancur announced he would give top priority to the country's economic problems and to negotiating an amnesty for the insurgents. The latter may provoke the first challenge for his administration. Colombian military leaders up to now have vetoed proposals by civilian leaders that would give the leftist insurgents immunity for crimes, including those committed in combat, in exchange for laying down their arms.

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In the US Ambassador's view, the election of Betancur was a major victory for the democratic process. Allegations of fraud or vote manipulation have been almost nonexistent

Further, the election was a major defeat for the insurgents and an embarrassment for the far left. Except for some scattered bombings, the Cuban-supported M-19 insurgent group's threat to sabotage the elections never materialized, and the only far-left candidate running, Gerardo Molina, received less than 1 percent of the total vote.

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The New President

Betancur has been prominent in Colombian politics for more than 20 years, running for president four times before and losing in 1978 to the present incumbent, Julio Cesar Turbay, by less than 3 percent of the vote. An enigma to most Conservative leaders, Betancur does not belong to either of the party's two main factions, and he does not have a readily definable circle of advisers on whom he relies for advice.

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Betancur projects a grandfatherly image, but he is a much more astute and shrewd politician than his appearance would indicate. Although he has not held high office before and is untested in the rough and tumble of presidential politics, his performance as Minister of Labor in the early

1960s suggests that he is an able and skillful administrator who could obtain the best from his subordinates—a trait uncommon among Colombian politicians, and one that will be useful in the chief executive. [redacted]

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Betancur's comments to Embassy officers over the years indicate that he is aware of the realities of Colombia's politics and is willing to adapt himself to them to maintain his popularity and win the presidency. Recently he has attempted to portray himself as a conciliator, one who would not only maintain the bipartisan government that has been the practice since 1957, but would also bring all contending political factions represented within the two major democratic parties into the government. This stance may in fact represent his preferred personal style. [redacted]

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Closely allied to Betancur the "conciliator" is Betancur the "pragmatist." Recently he told a US Embassy official that in his view no political system is perfect; that 25 percent of each of the major worldwide political systems would be workable and useful in Colombia and should be adopted. While Betancur is regarded by Embassy sources as having strong Christian Democratic leanings, his expressed beliefs often defy a precise ideological stamp. This is the source of some mistrust by the more conservative elements in Colombia, including the right wing of his own party as well as some within the armed forces who remember that Betancur twice ran as a dissident candidate opposing his party's official nominee. [redacted]

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Betancur has traveled a long ideological road, from virulent Fascism in the 1940s—when he wrote editorials for Conservative papers—to his present predominantly Christian Democratic views. Despite these ideological shifts, Betancur has been true to two principles: social justice and intense nationalism. The former probably derives from his humble origins as a coal miner's son and from his strong religious faith. Betancur's nationalism in the past has been vented in resentment at certain US actions and programs that appeared to him to be paternalistic. He has particularly resented what he considers humiliating conditions attached to former US aid programs in Colombia as well as allegedly condescending US attitudes toward aid recipients. Betancur described the Alliance for Progress as an affront to national dignity, particularly its requirement that aid shipments must come in US ships and the plethora of US technicians sent to Colombia to implement the program. He was also critical of US efforts to export "family planning" which he publicly described as an attempt to impose alien values on the Colombian people. [redacted]

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On economic matters, Betancur is a fervent disciple of Keynes and has expressed the view that combating unemployment is a government's chief economic responsibility, more important than attempting to balance the budget, increase productivity or stabilize prices. [] 25X1

**Problems Facing
Betancur**

The new administration will face major challenges, both short and long term. [] 25X1

Immediate Concerns

In the first months of his term, Betancur will be preoccupied with meeting the demands of both major parties for positions in the government. One of the remaining vestiges of the National Front system under which the country was governed from 1958 to 1974 is the principle of power sharing—an equitable distribution of appointive positions between the two major political parties. Further, a two-thirds vote is required to pass any legislation, and near parity between the Liberal and Conservative parties exists in the Congress elected on 14 March. Thus, a new government cannot take strong action without bipartisan support. []

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Longer Term Challenges

The new administration faces what the US Embassy has described as major long-term challenges to democratic government in Colombia, including:

- A security threat posed by longstanding rural insurgency and urban terrorism.
- Widespread corruption, much of it stemming from the country's illicit narcotics traffic.
- Labor and middle class frustrations in the face of slow economic growth, declining real wages and reduced opportunities for social and economic development.

These and other problems will provide a fertile field for populist or extreme-leftist exploitation. []

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The Security Threat

Colombia's most active and troublesome guerrilla group is the M-19. Counterinsurgency operations have been unable to completely eradicate it from strongholds in the south or to halt the arrival of new recruits or arms. The other major group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), declared a political truce for the duration of the election campaign but Embassy sources believe it soon will resume military operations against the government. []

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The insurgent organizations have threatened publicly to increase their activities unless Bogota makes political concessions, but their demands are unacceptable to the military. Despite the persistence of the Cuban-supported guerrillas, they are not yet strong enough to challenge the

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government for control of the more populated areas of the country. Civilian and security authorities generally agree on the military tactics to control the insurgents: these include strict curfew, control of the movement of people, food, and materials within specified "war zones," and good treatment of defectors. However, top officers, including Army Commander Landazabal, have publicly insisted that defeating the guerrillas is not strictly a military problem; without social, economic, and political reforms, they say, it will be impossible to put an end to subversion. [redacted]

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Drugs, Crime, and Corruption

The increasingly influential drug industry, which has grown rapidly since the mid-1970s, imposes a highly corrosive factor on the political and social fabric. [redacted] it is adding greatly to police and judicial workloads, straining their capacity and revealing—or creating—glaring inadequacies. This undermines public confidence in the enforcement agencies in particular and government in general. In the opinion of the US Ambassador the drug dealers' ability either to bribe or intimidate officials is feeding public cynicism. Large-scale drug trafficking has fueled Colombia's extensive illicit economy, generated a new elite of drug barons, and contributed to a significant rise in crime, violence, and corruption. [redacted]

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Economic Vulnerabilities

Once one of the fastest growing and most dynamic economies in Latin America, the Colombian economy has been in the doldrums since 1979 as a result of slowed global economic growth and weakened demand for traditional primary exports. Attempts to slow inflation with restrictive monetary and tight fiscal policies intensified the problems of returning to earlier levels of prosperity, which had permitted an appreciable degree of upward mobility for the rural and urban poor. [redacted]

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The new administration will face continuing high inflation, high unemployment, and labor unrest. While there may be some gains toward the end of 1982 as recovery begins in the developed Western countries, the establishment of effective government policies and the management of recovery will require more imagination and conviction than Betancur demonstrated during the election campaign. [redacted]

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New Administration's Policies

Throughout the campaign, Betancur avoided a specific program of action to deal with the country's endemic problems. Instead, his proposed cures were carefully phrased in generalities unlikely to scare away potential supporters. The strategy of the Conservative Party, according to Embassy

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sources, was to focus on the personality of its candidate—which the party believed was the Conservatives' biggest asset—and on the major campaign theme that only Betancur could deal with the nation's problems. []

US Embassy officers believe there is very little to be gleaned from over six months of active campaigning to suggest what specific policies Betancur might follow, or to what extent he will be able to keep the Conservative Party united and its feuding factions under control. The President-elect's promise to end the three-year-long state of siege and lift tough security laws aimed at combating leftwing guerrilla activities is controversial and is unlikely to be implemented without the support of the military and the 25X1 right wing of his own party. [] the promise appears designed to create a climate for negotiations that would avoid confrontation with the insurgent groups and give him time to work out terms of an amnesty that will be acceptable to all sides. [] 25X1

Betancur has remained publicly silent on narcotics trafficking and the enormous role that Colombia plays as an exporter and conduit for drugs entering the United States. Privately, however, he has told US Embassy officers that the problem is morally corrupting, and has shown readiness to work toward ending trafficking. [] 25X1

As President, however, we believe his personal views will be tempered by political reality. No Colombian president will be able to eliminate the problem because drug producing and trafficking are so embedded in Colombian social, economic, and political mores. Moreover, public espousal of a tough policy against the drug traffickers has little value in terms of generating political support. Betancur has thus been reluctant to confront the social and economic consequences in Colombia of a serious antidrug campaign—including herbicidal eradication. The US Embassy believes that this reluctance—which is not Betancur's alone—springs from the role that narcotics-generated money has played in the campaigns of both major political parties. In addition, Betancur has stated privately to US representatives that narcotics use is not a major problem in Colombia and that the issue is one for the United States to deal with on its own soil. []

Betancur's social and economic policies are even less defined. While 25X1 decrying rising unemployment, inflation, and industrial and agricultural stagnation, he has not offered specific programs or remedies. Indeed, it would be politically difficult for him to do so. The incumbent President is a Liberal, for example, but his Cabinet by constitutional mandate is essentially a Conservative-Liberal coalition and both wings of the Conservative Party have been associated with its economic policies. The US

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Ambassador believes that Betancur's approach will be to try to drive interest rates down in order to stimulate industrial development, but he is uncertain as to what specific moves he may propose. []

Implications for the United States

We share the view of the US Ambassador in Bogota that the inauguration of Betancur will signal some changes in the relationship that the United States has had with Colombia in the last four years. Under the Turbay administration, Colombia moved from viewing with indifference issues not directly affecting it to seeing its interests in broader, more regional terms. There has been a progressive convergence of views with the United States, particularly concerning problems of economic instability in the Caribbean Basin, Soviet-Cuban adventurism and support for insurgent movements in the hemisphere, and means of combating narcotics trafficking. []

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Although Betancur has personally informed the US Ambassador that he favors a continuing dialogue with the United States on regional issues, he does not share Turbay's affinity for working closely with Washington, nor is he likely to maintain the same interest in stemming Marxist penetration elsewhere in the Caribbean. We believe that Betancur will establish a government generally more nationalistic and Third World-oriented than the present administration but will reject any invitation to join the nonaligned nations. In our opinion, he will attempt to carve out a more independent niche for Colombia in dealing with regional and Third World problems and will avoid any suggestion that Colombia's relationship with Washington is that of a surrogate. Betancur told US Embassy officials that unlike President Turbay's move in 1980, he would not have put up a Colombian candidate to help the United States stave off the election of Cuba to the UN Security Council. His independent and nationalist bent—in earlier years he condemned both the Peace Corps and standby agreements with the International Monetary Fund—and, more recently, his emotional identification with the Argentine cause in the Falklands crisis are qualities that in the opinion of the US Ambassador will make him a more difficult individual to deal with than Turbay. []

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Betancur's foreign policy, [] probably will reflect his preference for "balanced relations" with the superpowers and his desire to maintain relations with all states regardless of ideology. Although Betancur strongly resents Cuban assistance to Colombian insurgents, he does not favor a formal break in relations, which were suspended in 1980. Instead, he reportedly believes the challenge should be met by attacking the root social causes of the insurgency—poverty, lack of health and education services, and inadequate economic and social development. []

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Betancur has openly opposed any effort by Latin American countries to expel the United States from the Organization of American States because of its support for Great Britain in the Falklands crisis. At the same time, he has told US Embassy officers that US policy toward Latin America is shortsighted and that it will take many years to repair badly damaged relations. [REDACTED]

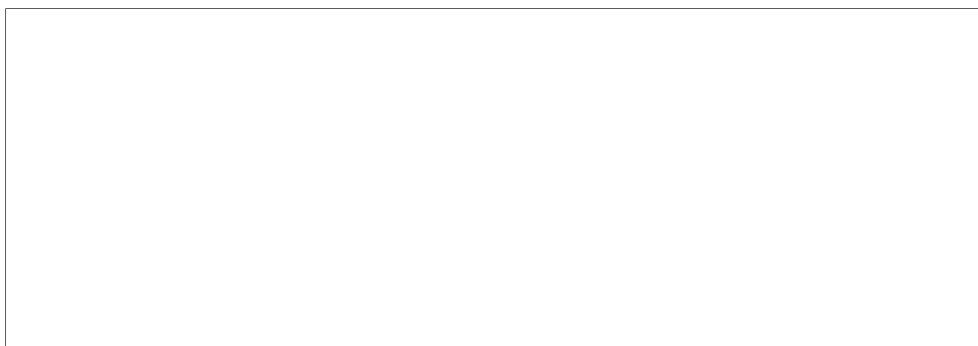
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In talks with US officials, Betancur has charged that the United States takes Colombia for granted. He specifically accused the United States of ignoring Colombia in planning for the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), and of according Venezuela—Colombia's political rival—too large a voice in implementation of the program of economic and military aid in a region that Bogota considers important to its security and economic interests. [REDACTED]

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For this reason, Betancur says that he will be more assertive than Turbay in seeking to play a larger and more independent role in the Caribbean, particularly in CBI meetings. Betancur believes that even though Colombia can give little financial help to the economically unstable states in the region, it can make up the difference with offers of human and technical resources. For Betancur, the assistance would be motivated by humanitarian goals as well as perceived security concerns—such as winning support in the region for Colombia's territorial disputes with Nicaragua and Venezuela—or the hope of expanding its export markets. [REDACTED]

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Embassy officers believe the new administration will monitor closely what steps the United States takes in law enforcement and eradication efforts within US territory before it considers changing its position. In their view, Betancur can be expected to use US interest in controlling narcotics trafficking as a bargaining chip to gain concessions on what he considers to be other, more important, bilateral issues, especially those involving trade and the sale of military hardware. If so, this could seriously affect continued implementation of the antidrug measures initiated by President Turbay in 1980 and in projected control programs, particularly at a time when drug cultivation and trafficking from Colombia seems to be increasing. [REDACTED]

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